

Leading Ways: MINDFULNESS AND LEADERSHIP

"The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouting of a ruler among fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one bungler destroys much good."

Ecclesiastes 9: 17-18

During a recent coaching session I was asked a simple, but befuddling question: "How can I be a more mindful leader?" I believe deeply that good leadership springs from being mindful and have spent much of my professional life trying to understand how this becomes manifest in the ways we lead. But a simple answer to this simple idea was not at the ready for me that day. Often, we think of mindfulness as being a lifelong undertaking, and it is, but the truly mindful life always begins with a single first act. It can be confounding when it is thought of as a thing, rather than as a process that is never complete and always unfolding to new insights, truths and depth. But describing a process is not at all easy. I also think that many who walk a path toward a more mindful life are reluctant to speak about it as this journey is intensely personal. But if these qualities are to have efficacy in the public realm it is important to bring them to that place. So, here are some preliminary thoughts on where the path begins.

THE MEDITATIVE PRACTICE

I believe that mindfulness requires some type of meditation. This does not mean that you need to give up all worldly goods, join the ashram or even sit on a meditation cushion. But to become more mindful will require developing a part of your inner life that allows for introspection, reflection and a calming perspective. All religious traditions have a meditation path; the Hindu and Buddhist tradition are perhaps best known, but the Qabalah practice in Judaism, the contemplative Christian and the Sufi path in Islam all include a practice of mindfulness that enhances the spirit. A meditative moment can be as simple as taking five minutes and bringing life back into a calming frame, but a longer dedication to a particular practice, one that might have been tested for a millennium will produce a deeper capacity for mindfulness.

CONTAINING THE EGO

Mindfulness is also greatly served by limiting that sense of our self that engages and reacts to the swirl of the world around us. Separating ourselves from this noise and seeking true understanding is where much of the thought behind the religious traditions listed above and the heart of western philosophy since Plato and Aristotle have been focused. All of the elements in this list are deeply interrelated and one of the reasons for meditation and contemplation is to gain just such a hold on our ego. When this happens, we are on the path to self-acceptance which is absolutely essential for mindfulness to emerge. And with this the emotional triggers that can rule our days are no longer as sensitive and reactive. With this peace comes acceptance of others, a ready forgiveness, and patience. Each of these serve mindfulness.

CURIOUS PRESENCE

Most people think of mindfulness as a quality that brings us to understand and value others. And it is, but the curiosity must be conveyed in a manner that is accepting, non-judgmental and supportive. Such an attitude can only be conveyed by those that have the calm of a reflective mind and an ego that is not stumbling about in the conversation. Most leaders do not fully understand that they are more valuable with well-formed questions and careful listening, then needing to know all the answers. Being able to be in the moment with others, to invite them into your calm and acceptance, is a valuable part of leadership mindfulness.

A GENEROUS SPIRIT

Our culture, fed by ego, leads us to grasp and compete, measuring our individual victories to the detriment of our working together for collective goals. It also leaves us disconnected from others and fearful that we will lose something valuable. But generosity actually produces more gain, more security and more of the genuine human connectedness, something we have selected for over the millennia. I have found that generosity and gratitude lead to a grace that reinforces our acceptance of self and fosters trust and openness in others.

JOY

Finally, and this is more of an outcome of mindfulness than a part of the path, is **joy**. Mindfulness opens the heart to happiness, celebration and spontaneity which leads to that most desired of human actions, deep fulfilling laughter. Mindfully letting go of judgment and accepting self and others, lets us see the foibles that are inevitably part of our human life and instead of being defeated by them, we see them for what they are, the silly strivings of imperfect beings reaching for perfection, and once we accept our fate, turning what could have been remorseful tragedy to healthy comedy.

A path to mindfulness can make life richer and more fulfilling. But it takes practice, study and dedication. There are many resources to help in this quest, but I've found these readings to be most helpful on the five topics discussed here. While each is relevant to all five themes, they are arranged in the order of which topic they principally address.

Gunaratana, Bhante, Mindfulness in Plain English, Wisdom Publications, Boston: 2011.

Chodron, Pema, Comfortable with Uncertainty, Shambhala Publication, Boston: 2002.

Hanson, Rick, Buddha's Brain, New Harbinger Publications, Oakland CA: 2009.

Schein, Edgar, Humble Inquiry, Berrett-Kohler, Oakland CA: 2013.

Grant, Adam, Give and Take, Penguin, New York: 2013.

Greenleaf, Robert, Servant Leadership, Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ: 1977.

Haidt, Jonathan, The Happiness Hypothesis, Basic Books, New York: 2006.